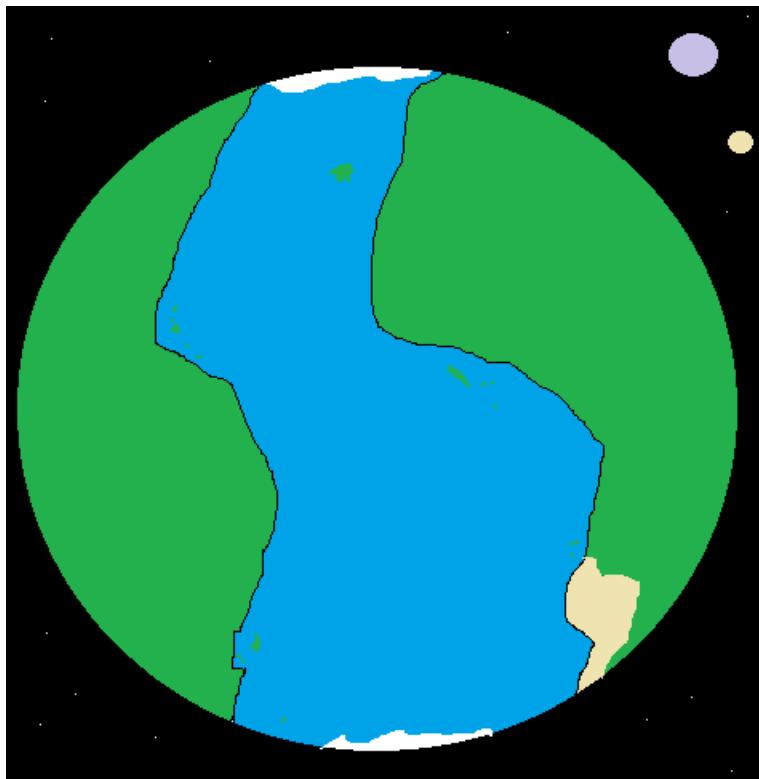


UNALIKE

Tales From An Other Earth

By Matt Pierard, Copyright 2017



*Earth, my likeness,
Though you look so impassive, ample and spheric there,
I now suspect that is not all;
I now suspect there is something fierce in you eligible to burst forth...*
----Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

MADELEINE HOWE

Rafe ran the length of the corridor then back again, three times in a row. He entered the apartment, stripped off his sweaty clothes and took a cool shower. Hot just used up energy. He dried off and dressed, then took the stairs up to the rooftop garden, where his lover, James, was weeding the vegetable crops. They were the last tenants of the apartment house as everyone else had either fled Vassile or had died from the crushing poverty.

"I just heard on the radio that the fighting has stopped in the Eastern Continent," James said, without much enthusiasm. He pulled a weed with a very long root out from a row of carrots, like a seamstress yanking a fine thread out of a garment. He knelt in the shadow of the water tower which provided his mate's shower, the windup radio on the potting table behind him.

Rafe sat at the table and watched James work a few minutes longer. James got up, stretched, and brought forth a small basket of produce for their evening meal. He sat opposite Rafe, who said,

"You don't sound very happy about the news."

James sighed and wiped sweat off his brow with his grimy hand.

"My folks are dead. All of our friends have left the city. The city itself is a wreck, as are dozens across the world."

"We have each other, though."

He took his lover's hands and held them, tightly, then he leaned over to kiss him on the clean side of his face.

Something made of glass whistled past them and shattered on the rooftop.

"Knock it off, faggots," snarled a voice from the next building over and two stories up. "No public displays in our neighborhood," the old man continued, flanked by his slovenly wife and a grandchild.

The couple jumped up angrily and went down the stairs to their flat.

"Het scum," Rafe muttered, plunking down into a comfortable chair.

James knelt before him and calmed him down.

Dinner was a stew of rehydrated legumes, and the fresh carrots and tomatoes of the garden. Their supplies were dwindling, perhaps enough to last another month at most. All of the markets had been cleaned out by those who doggedly had stayed behind. It was hard to leave a town you'd grown up in. Only two years before, Vassile had been a bustling city, a sister to Tannick, the big town across the bay that might have been likened to Chicago by Abel Garcia. Then the war began, first as a global internet crisis, spread by a virus that crippled banks, universities, small governments, and medical centers who used outdated software. The culprit was suspected to be an isolated region in the Eastern Continent led by a young, paranoiac dictator. The region was bombed and the virus became irrelevant as supporting

nations for the dictator retaliated in kind, and then old jealousies and hatreds inspired more attacks as the more rational government of the Western Continent joined in the fray. It was, to be so uncouth, a massive penis-measuring contest that hit its peak with the dissemination of a biochemical virus that slaughtered millions and forever shifted the social balance of world citizenry.

"We are going have to start making plans for leaving the city," Rafe said, spearing the last slice of carrot on his plate.

"And where are we, two middle-aged queers, going to go?"

"Don't talk like that, James. Anywhere would be better than here. The city is done for -- you just have to look across the bay to see our future."

Tannick's towers smoldered. Its world-class fleet of fishing and transport vessels crowded the bottom of the port. The museums had been looted. Women had been raped or forced into prostitution by opposing armies. All of its bridges had been demolished and there had been reports of people eating rats to survive. Disease was rampant.

James rose and cleared the table. As he returned, he brought a family photo and said, "I was born here and lived all of my life here.... but I am willing to leave just to keep you in my life."

The next morning, they began preparations to leave, but by midday, a sortie flew over the city. Buildings crumbled under the bombing raid, including the residence of the elderly bigot next door. As Rafe and James scrambled downstairs and out onto the street, they heard the cries of a child and investigated. It was the granddaughter they had seen in the window the evening before. She had made it down to the lobby in her school uniform, with a book satchel over her shoulder and a look of bewilderment on her face. Rafe took a few flights up to find little left of the upper floors except the sturdy stairway.

"We have to take her with us," James said.

At first the seven year-old protested as he swept her up in the crook of his arm, but when another air-raid occurred, she buried her face in his neck in horror. It took them three hours to travel to the edge of the city, which led into suburbia. By the fifth hour, they were taking a break in an abandoned mall, where they acquired a backpack and clothing for the child, as well as fresh water for their canteens. Every food source was empty, but James managed to scrounge packets of stale cookies and crackers from the office desks of chain-store managers.

"We need to get to the farm country," Rafe said. "There has to be fresh food there."

They reached the agricultural region after sundown, and in a church found a hundred refugees milling about with mugs of hot soup. The temporary family was assigned a corner to sleep in, and when day broke, were able to find someone who knew the child in their care. He was a schoolmate, whose mother agreed to take charge of the girl. All they knew about her was her name, Madeleine.

James and Rafael finally found a permanent home in a monastery known for its winery as well as its open-mindedness. The white-haired father had a reputation for his support of homeless and migrants. There were other homosexuals, female as well as male, already in residence, as the majority of the

younger monks had been conscripted into the military, not as fighters but as cooks and corpsman. The couple were assigned a cell with a bed and a bureau for their few things. The compound was self-supporting with a large kitchen garden and a private well. Except for a commons area where people dined and made use of a library, the buildings were not wired for electricity; the latrines were also in a separate building. Everyone was also assigned a job of some kind to give them a sense of continuity. Rafe was able to put his architectural training into rebuilding the recently looted and damaged winery, and James, a high school teacher, worked in the library.

It took over a month for the war to officially end, but the biochemical virus was doing a number on the population. Somehow, the majority of the victims were heterosexual males, followed progressively by their women, and finally homosexuals in smaller percentages. It had been geared to destroy all human life with aggressive tendencies, but it had clearly not been fully-tested, as if some ignorant, impatient madman was in charge of the government. Many sighed in relief as the madman and his family also succumbed to the virus.

A year passed. Rafael was working to rebuild Vassile, and James was teaching at a monastery-run religious school. They had been married by the father, along with several other same-sex couples, to little public outcry, and lived in a small house Rafael had built near the vineyards. On the fireplace mantelpiece sat the last remnant of James' past, the framed photo of himself as a boy, with his parents.

2

Madeleine Howe had been on vacation with her parents the week that war broke out. She, a mere six year-old, got lost in a melee that occurred on the boulevard during a religious festival after a terrorist in a truck rammed his way through a crowd of revellers. She was abducted by an elderly woman who had recently lost her own grandchild to disease, as there was no health care for her caste. Madeleine grew up first in the slums of that resort town, was rescued by a male couple after fighter planes destroyed the building her abductor and that woman's husband lived in, and later, as the war became insidiously cross-continental, in the caves of hills miles from the action. She never saw her parents again; later research revealed that her father had been conscripted into the army against his will and her mother, a pretty woman, had been forced to work in a bordello for army officers. It was an unbelievably ugly man's world at that time.

Soon, the conflict became out of control. Women and children who were able to get out of the cities, fled to the hills and forests, long-since depleted of predatory and even benign large animals by poachers and wealthy men on canned safaris. Their main competition for food were raptors, and the taste for flesh soon left their mouths. Abandoned farm crops became their sustenance as more men went off to fight in the war. Millions died on both sides of the world. Cities were destroyed by bombs dropped from flying machines, though they did not have the nuclear capability that Abel Garcia spoke of in his autobiography. As the ammunition ran out and a truce was signed, famine and disease swept through the world, akin to the Spanish influenza epidemic Garcia wrote about, except that the majority of the victims were male. Something literally in the chemistry of war had made them more susceptible to disease, like biological tripwire-mines. Women soon became the ruling sex by a ratio of seven to three, and the majority of the surviving men, ironically, were the homosexuals who were not allowed to fight. The women started turning to each other for comfort, to much younger men who had been adolescents when the war began, or giving up the physical side of their lives altogether.

The countryside had by now been taken over by the survivors. Towns gradually became sexually-segregated and the minority heterosexual men were left out of the equation. These men had become more docile, less aggressive as war became a crime and all elements of war were destroyed. In present day Earth, there were no guns, bombs, or cannon, except in museums or warehoused by the Continental Guard. The flying machines were dismantled and put away, and the age of air travel, and its abuse, disappeared from their culture. All aspects of the heterosexual male power structure were eliminated. Heterosexual women began forming religious enclaves similar to the Anglicans, led by Mother Madeleine.

Howe's transformation came in the years after her only child was born. She had been a flirt in her teens, dancing with the available boys, flattered by their attentions and arousals, but never letting it go too far. She lived in the mother-house of a nearly-abandoned convent run by a few elderly nuns, her false mother -- sadly, like her own -- long-since dead of the pandemic, where she was educated by them in mathematics, science, history, and religion. One night, a young man whom she had danced with followed her into the convent and found her in her room, dozing in a wine-induced torpor. She allowed him to join her and let him take her virginity. The next morning, he was gone, off to sea in the burgeoning fishing industry. Within a week, she had realized what had happened. She continued her studies and, instead of being shunned by her hosts, her pregnancy was treated as a gift.

Six months passed before she learned of the father's fate: he had been washed overboard in a storm with two other fishermen. Madeleine was saddened by it all, impregnated by a man she neither loved nor hated, with a fatherless child whom she could not abandon even though it was legal to do so. Andrea was born with the help of an aged midwife and raised, like her mother before her, in the church. Gradually, however, it was discovered that she was not heterosexual. By then, many of the older nuns had passed on and a new generation of novitiates had come into the church now led by Madeleine. The enclaves, now called citadels for their walled-in and remote locations, kept tabs on the growing dominant culture. Madeleine became aware of a school in the interior that would accept Andrea and prepare her for her new life with her own people. The girl initially did not want to leave the church and her mother, but Madeleine insisted because she knew that her child would never be happy in her current situation. Three months later, Madeleine received an ecstatic letter from her daughter and the die was cast.

Under Mother Madeleine's teaching, more citadels popped up throughout the world. They brought order to the chaotic communities of shunned heterosexual offspring of the ruling caste. They were treated in much the same way their forefathers had treated homosexuals before the war, as non-productive inferiors obsessed with sodomy, or in their case, vaginal intercourse. As Madeleine gathered this great unwashed community together, women began to take over in a secular way. They ran the agricultural concerns, the fisheries and markets, selected husbands, and made all the household decisions. Soon they were forming town councils, under the churches' guidance, and ironically became more powerful in their enclaves than their lesbian sisters were in the upper caste.

Madeleine Howe lived to the age of ninety-three. Andrea gave her two grandchildren, a boy and a girl, both of her caste, but a great-great-grandchild eventually returned to the fold, albeit an inferior male named David.

ERIN LUTON

1

Kenset is a small, andros-centric fishing village on the western coast of the Western Continent of Earth. It is not the well-known Earth of the other planetary system, but a smaller sphere roughly the size of Mars, which has two land masses separated by a vast ocean.

The cove is surrounded by a collection of cottages, each with their own solar power source, water well, and kitchen garden. Each is occupied by a male couple and their children, if any, the dominant husband working outside of the home while the passive husband is the homemaker.

Running parallel to the fishing piers and docks is the main road. On the other side is the village business district. There is a fish-processing plant, a general store and post office, a medical center, town hall, library, boarding house, and an elementary school. Offshore wind turbines power this part of town. The local government is run by a committee of town professionals, including the doctor.

Each day, Dr. James Luton escorts his twin daughters, Erin and Emma, to school before he opens up his office. The girls are two of only five girls in the village, the other twenty children being boys. Their identical appearance is as uncommon as their gender, although heads have long-since stopped turning as they walk down the street hand in hand. Their mode of dress also sets them apart, as males wear shirts and trousers of either brown, blue or green. The girls wear shin-length jumpers of lavender or yellow. The color red is not to be found anywhere, as it is associated solely with blood.

Blood, of course, is Dr. Luton's business; but in a town of little over one hundred citizens, his business would be a slow one. In order to stay afloat, he takes the overflow from neighboring larger villages, as well as the tourist trade. Beyond the cove, there is a popular beach resort where men from the city go for rest and recreation. The latter, in the form of sailing, surfing, and sex often results in bad sunburns and rough encounters with unfamiliar flora & fauna.

Luton has a reputation among townsfolk for treating women as well as men, which is looked down upon by many 100 percenters as disloyal to their community. Surrounding the village are agricultural towns that are gender-centric -- a granary run by women, an orchard by men, and so on. Accidents happen and sometimes they overwhelm the town physicians, so patients are sent down to Kenset for treatment.

Steven, the doctor's nurse, usually arrives a few minutes after his employer. He has been working at the cove for just over a year, placed directly after graduation from the government-run nursing college. He is unusually single and resides at the boarding house with like-situated men, most of whom are older widowers. A childhood accident involving farm machinery left him with a disfigured face, which he has made up for with a muscular physique that comes in handy when a burly fisherman is thrashing about on a gurney as the doctor tends to his occupational injuries. Weekends he spends at the beach, where he receives his fair share of sexual gratification.

When the occasional female patient comes in, it is a new experience for Steven, whose only previous encounters with female anatomy occurred in the care of his baby sister back on the farm. Again, the older residents cluck in the general store, primarily two fishwives whose husbands understandably spend much time at sea, "Of course Dr. Luton tends to 'their' kind, having a pair of them in his own

household!" Sean Luton, James' husband and stepfather to the girls, responded while shopping for linens, "Attend to the motes in thine own eyes, harpies," without bothering to look up at the offending parties. The pair left the store in a huff, followed by a cloud of guffaws from other customers.

Sean, then a botany major, and James, taking pre-med courses, met at university fifteen years earlier. They fell in love and married shortly after graduation, Sean obtaining a degree in Herbal Pharmacology. Indeed, he provides Kensem with much of its drugs. Remaining in the college town while James completed his residency, the couple became parents via James' good friend Mary Redmond, who worked for the government health department. In Terran culture, men cultivate such friendships in order to ultimately procreate, a procedure which is clinical in nature. Both partners of the procreators are present during the act of coitus, which is thankfully brief and occurring at the height of sexual pleasure.

Within a week, James became a father. As was tradition, Erin and Emma initially spent their infant years with their mothers, then came to live with their fathers from age six to twelve. As adolescence approaches, the children are sent off to segregated boarding schools to prepare them for professional or vocational service. They see their parents for one week each of spring, summer, and winter solstices before heading off to their specific colleges. Every Terran citizen receives a free education and few fail to meet expectations. There are no poor people, nor rich people. Everyone has his duty to the State, even the Outcasts.

The Outcasts make up less than two percent of the world population. They live in matriarchies within citadel-like communes as far away from the rest of civilization as possible. What sets them apart is their sexuality -- they are, in fact, heterosexuals. Women are the ruling class and men are their chattel. Only the rare genius is allowed to be educated beyond the 8th grade, may marry but must not procreate. The less-common Alpha male is sterilized after his first offense, which is usually rape; a murder conviction results in hanging. Outcasts have little contact with the ruling order beyond trade for products they cannot produce themselves and humanitarian aid in cases of natural disaster.

It was Sean who first noticed that his stepdaughter Erin was different from the other girls in the village. He had chosen not to procreate outwardly because of his gentle nature and desire to provide a healthy homelife for his husband and children. Inwardly, he despised all aspects of heterosexuality, even taking umbrage when Mary offered herself to him a year after the twins were born to father his own child. Blended families such as these were commonplace in their culture. Sean was, in truth, a 100 percenter much in the mode of the old biddies in the general store.

In the Luton household, bookshelves lined the living room walls, terminating in an alcove that served as James' home office. The girls were encouraged to read whatever was available in their father's library, as long as their hands were clean and they put books back where they found them. Of greatest interest to the twelve year-olds was the two-volume set on human anatomy, one devoted to female, the other to male. Emma naturally set her sights on understanding her gender better, but Erin gravitated curiously to the volume of male anatomy. Each book had a section on human sexuality, including graphic photos and line-drawings of arousal and intercourse. One weekend afternoon while James and Emma were outside playing a game of volleyball, Sean was shocked to find his other stepdaughter touching herself over her clothes while looking at photos of male arousal. Angrily, he snatched the book away from her and sent her to her room.

"It's just a phase, honey, natural curiosity in the unlike. Both of them have scientific minds, from heredity and ...osmosis," he chuckled. James was an open-minded sort, and of course he was blinded by love for his children. Sean was not so easily swayed. "I would like to have Erin independently evaluated, James. She's not like the other girls and has become introverted. This is in her best interest, I tell you."

Reluctantly, James took his daughter into the city for a psychiatric evaluation. When Sean's estimation was confirmed, James was stunned. He contacted Mary and they met to discuss their daughter's future. A month later, shortly after the twins turned thirteen, Erin was sent to an Outcast commune to begin her new life. It was a convent school, one of the best in the State, for people of their kind. She would receive a respectable education and join a profession necessary for her people, perhaps following in her father's footsteps as a doctor.

For Erin it was an introspective period of her life. As she sat at the desk in her dormitory room, she fingered the letter from her mother, who had been unable to accompany James and Erin to the school. In truth, Mary Redmond was heartbroken; despite her position in the community, there was an element of shame in the situation. She had hoped that Erin would come to work alongside her in the health department, as Emma was decidedly more her father's daughter.

Erin looked out of the window above her desk at the nuns working the rows of crops in the convent courtyard. They wore dark green overalls and short gray hair. Her own uniform was a white blouse and a jumper of the same rough green material. Her dorm room was plainer than the one she shared with Emma back in Kensem. There was a single bed and a bureau of a lower-quality wood than that of which she was familiar. She shared bathroom facilities with a dozen other girls on her floor. But the school itself was co-ed, at least to the 8th grade; she was in seventh now. The boys here were a duller lot than the boys of Kensem. They had only three life choices: work in the fields, work on the fishing boats, or work running their family households full-time. If she wanted to hold a deeper conversation, it was only with her like-minded female peers.

Back home in Kensem, Emma rather quickly eased into the mode of an only child. She got on the train to Alder Wood, the prep school her mother had attended, with a certain amount of happy anticipation, James and Sean at her side. As they pulled up to the school by way of a chartered electric bus, the only technological transport available to Terran citizens, both parents got a little misty-eyed. They attended a welcoming tea for new students and inspected the grounds and dormitories. Emma, like some of the other girls, received long, tight (and somewhat embarrassing) hugs from their fathers as they made their exits.

As James and Sean sat together on the train back towards Kensem, they held hands for the first time in weeks. Initially, James had shut Sean out for -- in his mind -- betraying Erin for the sake of conventionality, so Sean could hold his head up in town society. James spent several nights on his office sofa after consoling Erin and taking off as much time as he could to be with her. They would go on long walks into the forest and fields beyond Kensem, something she would no longer be able to do within the restrictions of her new society. James strived to understand his girl and support her emotionally. The day after he delivered her to Green Cove, he and Sean formed a sort of truce, and Sean softened his attitude towards his stepchild. It would be a long time before they could function as a complete family again.

Life at Green Cove was really not that much different from Kenset for Erin. The food was prepared as the same, uncomplicated dishes she had known since babyhood. The largely-female populace of the convent school community was a little more conservative. There was a daily prayer service in the morning and evening. Among her standard junior high courses was a class in adulthood, which included sex education and mothering. The girls were taught about males and how they were to be treated. Older men living in retirement from work were accorded the most respect. Younger men would be picked out during harvest festivals or solstice celebrations as potential mates.

As she entered the ninth grade, boys disappeared from the school rooms to go work in the fields or fisheries, much to Erin's dismay. She had become friendly with a few of them, as she had back in Kenset with other boys, but because of their lack of interest in higher pursuits, she had no desire to marry any of them. The other girls scoffed at her high-mindedness.

"You don't marry a man for his *mind*, Erin!" Lisa Brown told her one day in the hallway to Chemistry. "You marry him for his," she nudged her salaciously, "You know!"

Erin rolled her eyes and focused on her studies. Gradually, she began to accept her new life and the choices she was offered. Indeed, the nuns provided students with books of romance and history, as well as a more blunt pictorial magazine full of photos of bare-chested men working in the fields or hauling in nets full of fish. Erin would wile away her private time at night marveling over these images.

At seventeen, she homed in on one particular fellow, a brawny youth of eighteen named Joseph Gray. He was a good dancer and she felt safe in his arms as they waltzed around the floor of the convent gymnasium. It was the night of the winter solstice celebration. She proposed to him in the atria that overlooked the moonlit sea beyond the cove, and they were married a month after she graduated from 12th grade.

They set up housekeeping in an apartment house on convent grounds given over to university students. Joseph Luton continued his work on the fishing dock as his wife began her pre-med studies. She became pregnant with the first of their two allotted children a year later. James Joseph Luton was born near the end of her sophomore year. Joe was given parental leave to care for his son while his wife continued her education. He nursed the boy with his mother's expressed milk, he diapered him in squares of cotton flannel that he hand-washed in the bathroom sink, and he rocked him to sleep in a chair handed down to him by his own father.

After Erin graduated from medical college, she went to work for the community hospital. She and her young family moved out of the convent apartment and into a larger flat down the street from the twelve-bed medical facility. The citadel was large enough to accommodate a central park that provided an oasis of greenery for the citizens. Here, Joe would take his son to play in the grass with other toddlers. He would sit with the other fathers and chat about childcare and upcoming public events. His love for his son made him want to leave fishing forever, or at least until his son was old enough not to need him anymore. He and Erin had discussed having a second child -- he knew she would have liked to have a daughter of her own, to carry on the family business if she so chose. Erin had heard, in the yearly winter solstice letter from her father, that Emma had chosen to abandon science for the fine arts. She had fallen in love with dance and decided to pursue it as her vocation. Indeed, she looked graceful in the photos her father included.

Erin had not seen her family in person in almost ten years. Both her biological parents were in their forties now and their hair had grown a bit grayer in the intervening years. Sean, she noted with amusement, had lost nearly all of his; she had long-since forgiven him for outing her, but his vanity was something of a family joke. The photos were framed and set among a few other mementoes on the mantelpiece of the living room fireplace: a figurine of a fish that Joe had fashioned out of scrap-wood, a photo of his birth family, and a color-field tile young James had made in kindergarten. Tiles were painted by the children and then fired in an oast at the citadel pottery guild. In their austere culture, where bare walls were the norm, these objets d'art defined housing as belonging to specific families.

3

Emma glided across the stage with joyous abandon in a diaphanous costume of pale yellow material that covered her from breasts to mid-thigh. The music was Stravinsky-like, uneven and emotional. Her partner hoisted her up as an offering to ancient goddesses as other women whirled around them in similar garments tinted in shades of blue and green.

Sean took James' hand in the audience, overwhelmed with pride and admiration. James squeezed it and nodded. After the performance was over, both men made their way down the amphitheatre's steps to greet their daughter.

"You were magnificent, Em," Sean said, hugging her.

"Very much so," James said, as he hugged her next.

"Thank you, fathers," she said softly, tears in her eyes. "I only wish that, somehow, Erin was here."

"I took a few photos, love," James said, holding up the Polaroid-style instrument. "I will include them in next month's missive."

His tone took on a formality in public that was different from his casual talk at home. Other families were embracing their adult children who performed in the show. Shortly, Emma's wife Cybil joined their family group. She was darker than most people of their race, which was similar to Native American, and wore her black hair quite long and loose, appearing to be wearing a shawl across her finely-muscled shoulders.

"Hiya Pops," she said to Sean, embracing him, despite his stiffening up. James and Emma barely held back their chuckling.

"Respect the space, darling," Emma said, gently pulling them apart.

James accepted her embrace more willingly. She was a vibrant beauty and a welcome addition to their clan. They were on a cross-continent tour with a male troupe, and caused occasional controversy by dancing -with- them in an artistic tribute to pre-war society. For it was a fact in their history that the heterosexuals had at one time held the upper-hand, which ended with the last of their ridiculous wars. Millions of their men had died, and their abandoned women had created the matriarchies of today. Homosexual men became the providers of future generations, as the incidence of heterosexuality diminished. Technology deemed divisive was also abandoned, including air travel and automobiles,

power from coal and petroleum, and above all the use of gunpowder, dynamite and other violent propellants. Nuclear power was never even attempted and any thoughts of its use were quickly suppressed.

Poverty disappeared because the surviving men had no say when it came to intercourse. Heterosexual women made all decisions from birth to death. As their populations decreased, they chose to move their people to the remotest regions and build faith-based citadels like Green Cove.

"Oh, Lord, the looks on the faces of the agri-class!" Cybil laughed over dinner that evening. In honor of his eccentric stepdaughters, Sean had prepared a vegan feast, though they passed on the wine due to the fermentation process. "Yeast eats sugar, Papa," Emma gently scolded. It was all Sean could do to hold his tongue.

"When Jon Glass lifts me up to the heavens," Cybil continued, "I'm wearing a heavy garment and cowl which none of the other women have the strength for, you see," she added.

"People have actually walked out on us," Emma continued, earnestly. "They shield their children's eyes! It's really *quite* provincial."

Rather indelicately changing the subject, Sean asked, "When do you plan on starting your own family?"

"Not for a long while, I hope," Cybil said, flatly.

The fathers were a bit stunned. Emma said, "Pregnancy does something to a woman's body, Papa."

"Yes -- fulfills her reason for being," Sean blurted. He had had perhaps too much wine.

"Who wants dessert?" James said in a jovial attempt at rerouting the subject, despite his daughter-in-law's open-mouthed reaction. "I found some lovely pears at the farmer's market in --"

Cybil did not need alcohol to unfurl her tongue. Her expletive was as juicy as the fruit James set upon the table. Sean stood up abruptly, if a bit wobbly, and left the table. Emma rose and guided him outside to cool off in the autumn air.

"That was very uncalled for, daughter," James said to Cybil, who started to say something else but shut it off. He handed her a golden-brown pear. "Eat. Doctor's orders."

She smiled slightly and did as she was told. Respect for her wife's father kept her quiet. He caressed her munching cheek briefly as he joined his blood kin outdoors.

4

Erin's water broke in the midst of a minor operation, lancing a boil on the rump of an older nun. The lady had acquired it while riding a mule sans saddle, as was her wont, while trying to dislodge a stubborn stone from the wheat field.

"Damn!" Erin muttered, and passed the lancet over to her assistant, Susan.

"God be with you, sister," the nun said as Erin was wheeled from the room in an old rattan & wooden chair. Much of the citadel's furnishing ran to the antique.

Now that James Jr was ensconced in first grade, Joe had gone back to the docks to resume his trade. He was two miles off the coast when he received radio transmission about his wife's labor. A storm had swelled up and it would not be prudent for them to return to harbor, for fear of dashing the vessel on the jagged rocks. The message was relayed by courier to the delivery room. Erin cursed more colorfully this time.

It took longer than her first labor to deliver her second child. She -- yes, a daughter -- was born breach and had to be carefully repositioned by the midwives for natural birth. Caesarean operations were not an option for Outcasts. Rebecca Mary Luton was born at 3 AM sharp, named after each of her biological grandmothers. Bucking tradition, Mary made the trek down the coast to see her granddaughter a few weeks later. As the ruling caste was not allowed inside the citadel proper, a small meeting house was made available outside the compound. Mary met her extended family for the first time, including Joe's widowed mother and young James. It was all very proper and guarded, as was the custom, but a pleasant one for all involved.

Sean, of all people, crowded with delight when he opened Erin's mail addressed to him and James. Photos of Baby Rebecca and toddler James, of Mary and Erin, and a group shot of the extended family were arrayed on the dining table for the older couple to enjoy. However, all but the group shot landed on the fireplace mantle, the other photo winding up in James' memento book he kept in his office desk.

DAVID LOGAN

1

David Logan stood on the balcony of the lighthouse, scenting the air. A storm was coming, would be here in half a day. Of course, this would have to be the day *she* would be arriving. It had been a long time since he had had a woman.

The lighthouse was situated on the northeastern coast of the Western Continent. The nearest village was the damnably female-centric Seagirt; 125 women and girls, and none available for him. Sometimes he envied his brothers on the Eastern Continent -- they had wives, even if they had no right to leave their citadels. They had warm beds with their wives, even though they were not the masters of their domains. They tilled the soil, and grew the wheat, separated the fruit from the chaff and ground it down into flour. They rendered the oil from vegetable matter, and they mixed it with the flour and water to bake in ovens for their wives and children. But they could never leave their remote enclave, and their only experience of the sea was fishing from it. They could never travel across the vast ocean to visit their distant relatives in the West, because it simply wasn't done. It was, in fact, quite illegal.

David downed the winding staircase to his quarters. He had already begun cleaning up the place in anticipation of her; he believed that it was indeed she who had visited him six months earlier. As was tradition, she gave him no name so he called her Anna. She had perfect, pale golden skin and lustrous

brown hair that fell past her shoulders. He fed her with peaches and grapes, good wine and bread, goat cheese and honey. All of these were made available to him by his brother, Samuel, who worked for the government and had recommended him for the job. Anna had stayed for three days, coming and going on the freight steamer that delivered his monthly supplies, and the care packages from Samuel and his husband, John. They lived in the city of Tonnest, two hundred miles up the coast. David had little to give back in return, but made little toys for their children out of scrap wood and wire.

David had been born thirty-five years earlier to Samuel's father, Andrew and mother Sela. Andrew and Sela had been friends at university and decided to become a mating pair for life. He had also sired her daughter Taryn, now in graduate school at another university in the interior. David was their middle child and was outed at age 14 by a girl from a neighboring boarding school to the male-centric academy. There had been an athletic competition, the two engaging in coed wrestling when she felt his erection against her thigh. At that age, it was at first dismissed as accidental and the match continued after he took a breather. But despite his earnest concentration on the task at hand, the scent of her became too intoxicating and he began to rock back and forth until he ejaculated. The girl then threw him aside, angrily rubbing dirt into the stain on her tights. He was summarily dismissed the next day and put on the train to a citadel fifty-three miles south of his current location. Sela had gone with him, as Andrew was too angry to deal with him. The circumstances of his outing did not set well with the convent mother and he was sent immediately out to sea with a fishing crew experienced in such matters.

David spent the next twenty years of his life learning the ways of the ocean, beginning with the lowliest chores and gradually working his way up, aided by his higher-than-average intellect. By 27, he was skipper of his own vessel, training other young ne'er-do-wells how to become proper citadel men. Unlike them, however, he never found a permanent mate. The graduates of the convent university deigned engage in sometimes lively conversation with him but had no desire to wed a man who knew as much or more than they did, ultimately marrying the fellows he dismissed as lunkheads. If Sam had not come to his rescue, he probably would have died a virgin. Shortly after his 29th birthday, he received his commission and moved into the lighthouse. Six months into his stay, he received his first Anna, which was the name of the girl who ultimately had betrayed him.

Prostitution was legal in the Western Continent. It was seen as a necessity for single workers living in remote areas, regardless of sexuality. Every six months, a companion would arrive to a lighthouse, scientific outpost, or natural resources camp to deliver safe, clean comfort to the occupant. All were college-educated, none had ever found mates, usually due to some physical flaw. David's first mistress had a limp, from a poorly-formed right foot. Otherwise she was lovely, good-hearted, and a wonderful first experience for him. Despite his naming convention, he displayed no ill-will to these women. The only females he had ever contemplated harming were the haughty flirts of the citadel. It was a relief to get away from them. He'd had more complex relationships with the seagulls who nested in the rocks surrounding the lighthouse.

His living quarters consisted of the middle and bottom floors of the building. The smoothed roundness of the exterior was complimented by a more evenly-segmented polygonal interior, so that conventionally-shaped furniture could be pushed against the walls and not leave arced gaps behind them. He had a double-bed and a wardrobe against one side of the room, a comfortable armchair and a free-standing lamp, and a counterspace with his radio equipment and a row of books directly opposite. The kitchen and bathroom were on the ground floor, though he kept a ewer and basin, and a chamber pot in his living area in case of flooding, or the few times he fell ill with fever. Medical treatment was

available from the doctor at Seagirt, who would arrive by rowboat with her nurse in tow. Except for the whores, no women dared be alone with him. Some reputations never die.

2

Linda Cooper carefully walked the halls of the steam-freighter from the galley back to her room. She carried her lunch in a basket with a bottle of cold water, nodding pleasantly at passing crew-men, walking carefully to offset the rough seas far below. She wore a blue cotton tunic over matching trousers, standard unisex winter wear.

Linda entered her cabin and set the meal down on the desk in the corner. As this was her first ocean-bound assignment, she kept it simple: toast, applesauce, and a half-cup of rice. Afterward, she opened the dossier on David Logan that his brother had sent to her to acquaint herself with his needs and likes. She had joined the life after graduating convent academy with a less-than-stellar grade-point average, the most common reason for prostitution. She had had no desire to work menial positions in the university, living the chaste existence of voluntary servitude.

There were three types of prostitutes in the WC: men serving men, women serving women, or women serving men. Heterosexual women were not allowed to work outside of the citadels, a tradition of the matriarchy. Their men, being deemed inferior, were more expendable. Homosexuals, who made up the planet's upper caste, were free to work in whatever remote location that was available to them if they were unable to establish marriages and complimentary mating partners before reaching 30.

Linda lay back in her bunk after brushing her teeth and read the dossier with interest. She found that the man she would soon be entertaining liked the same authors as she, had written a few articles on shorebirds that had been published (under a pseudonym) in a nature monthly, and had a fondness for a particular act of lovemaking. The latter data came from previous mistresses of the man, who were required to keep a journal of said encounters for government files, as well as proof of work for payments. After closing the dossier, Linda picked up a book of wrestling moves to better acquaint herself for her coming visit.

3

The supply ship arrived shortly after noon that day. A delivery vessel rowed up to the lighthouse island dock and a burly youth carried three boxes up inside the building for David Logan. A few moments later, Linda stepped onto the dock. She wore a yellow caftan which caught the growing breeze and displayed her shapely figure to perfection. David took her valise and free hand up the steps to his living quarters. She was not the same woman he'd been with previously, but beggars could not be choosers in this society.

This season's Anna was tall and statuesque. Her flowing hair had a slight auburn tint to it. She lounged on the bed with her sandals off as he opened up the boxes to find his items of seduction. He set the bottle of wine from John's vineyard on a platter along with a small basket of grapes and a slice of feta and set them on the footstool before his chair. Then he brought over two tumblers of green glass he had made out of past wine bottles with a cutting-tool his sister Taryn had sent him. Linda welcomed the exotic meal; like most members of their caste, she had grown up on a very bland diet of unleavened bread, fried fish, and boiled vegetables. The most common fruit was melon, and the occasional apple.

The golden grapes, with their hint of pink blush, were extraordinary to her. She slowly savored each from half her portion as David worked his way up her body with his tender kisses.

Later as they lay together dozing in post-coital glow, she hummed a song of their people that made David cry a little.

"What is it?" she asked of a sudden. "Are you unhappy with me?"

"No, no, that's not it," he murmured, sitting up in the bed. "Sometimes I actually miss the citadel. That hymn you sang and others, we men of the sea would come home with our catch and there would be a hubbub in the marketplace. Someone would play that tune on a flute as we unloaded the boat and the children would run about, laughing and playing tag. In the evening, there might be a dance -- no alcohol of course, but there was still a giddiness of youth among the young lovers and the older couples out to watch. Needless to say, it's not something I get out here on this rock."

Outside, the wind was up several notches. The freighter had sailed down the coast to calmer waters, so as to wait out the storm which was barreling into the land. The village of Seagirt had closed down for the period, locking doors and shutters, leaving streets empty of content save gusts of sandy wind. Inside, women and their daughters gathered around fireplaces to keep company and take one another's minds off the horrid weather.

After an hour's rest, David dressed and went topside to check on the electric light revolving above. He wore a rubberized green poncho and calf-length rubber boots over his denim shirt and trousers. Rain slashed at his body and bare face. After awhile, he descended the stairs and hung his poncho on the waiting hook.

Linda remained in bed, dozing. She wore the top half of her winter garment, the caftan draped over the armchair. Smiling proudly, David went downstairs to make a pot of tea. So far, there was no seepage at the front door, and the independent power source kept everything running smoothly. He cooked a slab of fish on the stove with a sliced onion and carrots, and brought the lot up in a large basket, setting it on the counterspace near the books. He noticed one volume missing and found his companion reading it as she sat up in the bed. It was a reprint of an ancient work of science, written at a time when men of his ilk still threw stupid wars over idiotic reasons.

"A-to-mic fih-fih..."

"Fission. It was a theory that was bandied about back then. 'The ultimate killing machine', can you believe it? This was a time when something as toxic as radium was being used to illuminate clock faces. Barbarians."

"A taboo subject in the convent, to be sure," Linda nodded, remembering the mother railing about the sins of the fathers during evening prayers. It had been the anniversary of the end of the final war, the 'final straw' as the mother put it.

They shared the dinner peacefully, sitting at the counter on wooden stools. Linda had tugged on her trousers once her bare bottom felt the cold wood, to David's amusement. Afterwards, she excused herself to use the facilities, and he rinsed the dishes. They played a game of chess at the kitchen table; she wasn't yet very good at it but it didn't matter.

Later, after he checked topside again, they went to bed to sleep. The storm moved farther away inland, working its mischief on a couple of farms and toppling a century-old tree into a schoolhouse, but there were no serious injuries.

Early the next morning, David rose and did his business, both downstairs in the loo and upstairs with his light. They made love again, winding up on the floor in the classic grappling position. This time, this Anna did not complain when he rocked against her and let fly the results of his passion.

The morning sun soon shone through the porthole windows upon them, as they lay giggling on the wooden floor. They bathed, dressed, and went for a walk around the tiny island, an acre or so of rocky outcropping and small patches of sand. The dock was slightly askew but still intact; David would have to see to it after Anna had left.

"What is your name, really?" David said to her as they headed back inside.

She hesitated. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes. I think it's high time I let Anna go."

"Linda."

"That's a pretty name. Linda," he said, rolling it around on his tongue.

She took his proffered hand as they climbed the stairs.

THE ALIENS

The plaque read; "Abel Garcia: Elder from the Stars" and his estimated birth and known death dates. The verdigrised metal plate was set into the monastery wall alongside a hundred other names. Michael ran his fingers over the raised lettering with something like pride. Garcia and his companions were the reason for the Continental Guard, of which he was now a cadet. Seventy years before, they had crash-landed on Earth -- not 'their' Earth, but Michael's. Four of them survived: Garcia, his partner Tony Ruman, a woman and her male mate, their names lost to history. The latter were sent to one of the citadels where the already belligerent male tried to start an insurrection and was summarily executed. The female, well-past child-bearing years, retreated into the motherhouse and used her skills to nurse the citadel's aged members.

Garcia's mate was at first elated to be on a world where his kind were the ruling class, until he was placed in isolation by them after Garcia betrayed him, ostensibly for the greater good.

"Not to mention that the act effectively punished the younger man for abandoning his mentor for our own people," noted Michael's companion dryly.

The youth was on a tour of the monastery where Garcia once lived, his friend an Elder who had been a small boy when Garcia appeared. The OE (Other Earth) man was already approaching his final years. He had once been a professor at a great university in a town called New Haven, a theorist in some OE alchemy called 'terra-forming' that replicated "that which only God can do," intoned the Elder to Michael.

The cadet, who had come to the monastery to do research on the origins of the Guards and the invaders who inspired them, was led to a storage room. There was a viewing screen already set up for his use to look at and listen to a collection of Garcia artifacts. His uniform was preserved on a mannequin under glass, and his possessions also on display in smaller vitrines. There was a figurine of a woman in robes holding up a torch, a vase of artificial flowers, and a framed photo of the younger Garcia and his family beside a conifer curiously draped with garlands and ornamentation.

Digitized for ease of use, the original leather-bound volumes also under glass, were his vessel's logbook and a personal history journal. Last were digitized examples of his favorite cultural works: books, music, artwork, and something called 'movies'. All but the latter had been cracked open by their technological experts, but the 'movies' only existed as intriguing filenames such as My Man Godfrey, Jezebel, La Belle et Bete, Juliet of the Spirits, Brokeback Mountain, and Singin' In The Rain.

The logbook began at "liftoff from Cape Canaveral, three days into the beginning of the War." The vehicle reportedly resembled a sailing vessel, according to accounts at the time, before it plunged into the Terran ocean. It carried fifty humanoids including Garcia and the three others mentioned. All of the crew were in a state of deep sleep as their vessel was flung far beyond their solar system towards planets they had discovered in their 21st century to be inhabitable. This flight occurred well into their 22nd century when their technology enabled them to colonize their moon and a smaller planet closer to their sun. A foolish notion, to inhabit airless climes just for the sake of science and a bizarre sense of survival, because they had already destroyed their own planet with pollution and war. Oddly enough, the lowly male brute was allowed to captain the ship; he was cruel to his woman, the ship's nurse, and disrespectful of his betters, Garcia and Ruman.

A week before the ship was set to land on Michael's planet, the quartet were revived and began to prepare for descent. At first they were elated to see the small, beautiful world beneath them, and even more intrigued to find it populated and lit up at night. They speculated about the inhabitants and wondered why only the coastal areas had been developed, as only a few lights could be seen here and there on the interior regions of the land masses. There were no satellites rotating about the planet, though they did pick up bits of radio frequencies -- instrumental music and human voices speaking in a cadence similar to English but no specific words. At one point, the captain verbally assaulted Garcia and Ruman had come to his aid, this during the final descent through the planet's atmosphere. A suitable site was aimed at, a large patch of desert in the southwestern quadrant of the Eastern Continent. Braking mechanisms failed and the ship flew a mile past its destination, plunging into a deep part of the ocean. The four climbed into a lifeboat with some personal effects and supplies, and ejected. They were picked up by a passing government transport and brought back to the EC for processing. None of the 46 other humanoids survived, though a few of their sleep chambers broke loose and floated away, some winding up on the coasts as late as years after, the occupants long dead of everything from suffocation to starvation.

The journal began with Garcia's birth in a village called Oakland California, on a continent called North America. His parents were of the lower caste both sexuality and financially speaking, but he was the

first of nine children (nine!) to graduate high school and the only one to graduate college. He worked as an engineer for about thirty years until a leg injury led him into the teaching profession. His last 'gig' was at Yale -- a university he noted cryptically, that graduated an 'Ellen Ripley, the world's first alien-fighter to receive an AA nomination'. Michael wrinkled his nose at the man's stranger dips into personal mythology. At this school, he met Ruman, a graduate student in literature. Garcia's ego told him that they fell in love almost instantly, as the younger man moved into his flat, the 'May-December' couple turning heads at faculty functions. Five years into their marriage, a sixth world war was launched. A technologist friend of Garcia's recommended him to their government's space administration and passage was booked for him and Ruman on the 'Liberty 15', along with 'some of the finest minds of my generation', the rest of that story picked up in the logbook.

The second half of the journal dealt with the fate of Garcia and his colleagues on their new Earth, focusing on he and his errant husband. Ruman was infatuated with the strength and beauty of Michael's people, specifically the men. Apparently on their world, it was perfectly acceptable to mate with other men's husbands. He flirted with them outrageously, a 'top used to getting his own way', but fidelity aside, the planet's men found him odd-looking. Ruman had pale skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, making him stick out like palomino among roans. Garcia, on the other hand, looked much like his hosts -- skin a golden tan, graying dark hair, and deep-brown eyes -- some of whom were attracted to him, but did not act on it.

Garcia ultimately consulted with government health officials, suggesting that it would be unwise for his lover to mate with their people without protection. This protection was in the form of rubber tubes, of which he had several samples, which were literally alien to them. In a society where vaginal intercourse is limited to procreation once or twice in a lifetime, and marital fidelity a rule in all adult male couplings, such an item never need exist. Needless to say, Ruman did not enjoy his quarantine. After a suicide attempt, 'so great is his vanity', he was placed in a sanatorium for observation. After he tried to rape a young nurse, he was sent to a remote prison, where he lived out the rest of his time on this earth. 'Ironically, Tony can have all the men he wants now, those he can catch.' Ruman wound up dead at 37 with a shiv in his heart.

Abel Garcia eventually settled in this monastery, where he finally found love and peace, the last surviving member of his race. Michael wiped away a tear as he turned off the viewer. He then visited the elder who had guided him and spent the night in his bed, as was their custom.

MINA WILSON

Mina chased the goats with a child-sized pail until the nanny stopped at the corner of the barn to have a snack from the trough. The little girl carefully laid the bucket beneath the goat, squatted, and milked nearly a full pail from her. She took it into the house and gave it to her mother Eleanor, who had been watching and smiling from the kitchen window.

"Very good, daughter," she said, taking a cookie from a jar on the shelf and giving it to her.

"Thank you, Mama."

Mina popped the small round sweet into her mouth and let the buttery walnut shortbread melt before swallowing it. Eleanor Wilson resumed washing a load of dishes in the sink. She had shamefully let them pile up in her distractions of the last few days. Bess had left her alone to run their farm while she was in the city for the week at an agricultural fair. It was the first time they'd lived apart in a dozen years and just on the third day, she missed her terribly. A bouquet of yellow roses had arrived that morning with a love note from Bess. They now sat in a vase of water on the sill of the window before her, their sweet fragrance freshening the room.

Eleanor finished her chore and pulled a book from the living room shelf. She sat at the yellow-stained oak dining table and rang the little bell that sat atop it.

Mina walked in from her room. She had washed up and changed into her school clothes: a white blouse and khaki shorts. The five year-old sat on the high chair opposite her mother so that their eyes were level. She placed her writing pad and pencil neatly before her and waited patiently as her mother opened the primer and began the day's first lesson. Class lasted until noon when they broke for lunch and twenty minutes of recess. A bright child, Mina had already begun piecing her own sentences together, with a few expected boo-boos.

"today, I milked my goat. She is a nany goat, her name is Susie."

Her cursive was a little awkward but that would improve in time. Mina was also catching on to arithmetic, adding small amounts together and subtracting others. She accurately counted the seven buttons on her blouse and the five roses in the vase. She could color inside the lines of her drawing book, but the crayon occasionally strayed. She could identify an oak tree, ear of corn, horse, goat (of course), and donkey with ease, but still had trouble with any human-made construct such as an electric bus, tall building, or telegraph pole as these items did not exist in the country. The nearest village, Greenton, was five miles away, and had these things. The city where Bess had gone, Krislund, had these things in abundance.

As Eleanor shooed Mina inside to take her nap, Olive Jones strode up, leading a tired-looking donkey by its reins.

"I've done plowing the north portion, Missus Wilson. George here is about beat."

"Thank you, Olive," said Eleanor, "You may have a swim in the pool if you like."

"Thanks ma'am! C'mon George."

The two plodded off to the barn where Olive put him into his stall, topped off his water and oats, and entered her small apartment opposite. She stripped off her sweaty overalls and shirt and washed herself at the sink, then pulled on a black one-piece swimsuit. She dove into the family pool with relish and swam a few laps. She was a plain, husky girl of nineteen who attended vocational school every other weekday, riding the six miles in on a second-hand bike. Olive came from a coastal village down south, Kensem, where she had lived with her fisherman father and homemaker stepfather. Her best friend, Em, was at university and considering a career in dance theater. Olive only dreamed that she could be that graceful.

Eleanor lay down for her own nap. She slept for about an hour until the gentle touch of Mina's hand on her cheek roused her.

"Hello Mama," the girl said brightly. "Olive's in the pool funny, like she's looking at the floor."

Eleanor sat up at once and ran outside. Olive indeed lay face-down in the water, unmoving. The older woman dove in instinctively, only to hear:

"Whoa, Missus Wilson, what's up?"

Olive tread water before her with her usual dumb look of wonderment.

"I -- I thought you had drowned!" Eleanor cried out over-emotionally.

"Oh no, Missus Wilson, I was just practicing holding my breath. You know, I joined the school swim team last week. I haven't swum underwater for any long distance such as a big pool, not even on the coast. Daddy forbid it."

Daddy was her stepfather, Raymond, who knew her limitations. He had helped Olive to secure this job via Bess, whom he had known at university.

"She's... not a smart girl," he had told her over tea in the Kensem Inn.

Bess had been down to market with a load of corn and potatoes to trade for cod and crab.

"But she's strong as a mule and has a gift for fixing things mechanical. Good temper if she keeps busy, like swimming and volleyball. We also believe that she's asexual."

Bess took her on practically for that last comment alone. She had lost two good workers in three years to girls from neighboring farms and was on the verge of hiring a man for the job, she was that desperate.

"You gave me quite a fright, Olive," Eleanor said, climbing the ladder in her sodden caftan. She stripped it off and hung it up to dry in the sun, after wrapping a towel around her nearly-nude body.

"I sure wish I had grown those," Olive commented casually, nodding at Eleanor's breasts. Her own chest was boy-flat and more than once she'd been mistaken for one. Eleanor looked down at her modest cleavage, amused.

"Wouldn't they get in the way, Ollie? One of the reasons I don't care much for heavy chores -- they are such a bother, especially in the summer!"

Olive pondered this for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders. She got out of the pool and padded back to her room in her sandals. Eleanor sighed and went back inside to get dressed.

Bess arrived in Greenton on Friday evening's train. Eleanor met her at the station with Mina in the horse & buggy, each wearing new dresses of green calico. Bess wore a brown man's shirt and her trademark stiff blue denim trousers and black work boots, as if ready for a day's work. She rarely dressed otherwise, except for a black sleeveless gown she looked stunning in at their occasional parties. Abel Garcia might have likened her to Ava Gardner, a great beauty from his planet's past history.

"How was the fair?" Eleanor asked, as they rode back home.

"Illuminating," Bess said before inhaling the spring air. "God, that tastes good!" she said after exhaling. "There's a certain staleness in the city air. All those buildings, all that pavement, all those *men* -- blech! I tell you, some of those buildings are eight stories high!"

"Did you go to the very top, Mommy?" Mina piped up. She sat between them, clutching the toy horse Bess had brought from the fair.

"No, honey, didn't have the time. There were exhibits and lectures and parties to attend."

"Parties?" Eleanor said, "But you left your gown behind."

"Not that sort of party, Ellie. We stood around sipping wine from an EC vineyard, and watched a dance troupe perform from over there. It was... different. The lead gal was dark-skinned and kinda wild."

When they got home, Mina was sent to her room to listen to the children's radio program on her earphones, while her parents enjoyed an hour or so of intimacy.

"Whoa," Eleanor said, aping Olive unconsciously afterwards, lying back somewhat short of breath. She felt positively ravished, and she liked it.

"Didn't even touch myself that whole time," Bess drawled. "O' course, most of the attendees were men this year. It's usually fifty-fifty. That dance program though... the dark girl, name of Cybil, literally flew through the air over us, on a wire of course, but it was amazing all the same and just plain beautiful."

They rested for another half-hour, bathed, and dressed for dinner. There was a lavish salad, crab cakes, and fresh fruit that Bess had brought back from the city, exotics from the EC.

"Mmm, this tastes like a tangy peach," Eleanor marveled, biting into a rosy-orange, bean-shaped fruit.

"They call it a 'mango'. Grows in the deep south of the country. That zinginess is an astringent, so go easy or your lips will pucker."

"What's 'pucker', Mama?"

Bess made a fish face before Eleanor could answer. Mina giggled. She ate small helpings carved off by Bess.

"I saw your Daddy in the city, honey," Bess said. "He's looking forward to seeing you next year."

Michael lived in government housing a block down the street from Continental Guard's headquarters with his husband, Kevin, a commercial artist. They had a recently-painted room waiting for her, with nice furniture under drop-cloths.

The girl frowned but didn't complain. Every child had to do it eventually.

"You'll have a nice room with soft green walls and a big window that you can slide open, and sit on a little porch. There is a big garden down below with all sorts of trees and with birds flying about. It's very pretty."

The girl sighed and said, "O-kay."

The women shared a look. On one hand they would miss her youthful vitality; on the other, it would be more peaceful. Bess had deliberately not chosen to procreate. She didn't even want a pet in the house, as Ellie had suggested, to fill in the gap of Mina's leaving. But within a month, the couple compromised with a yard-cat, who slept on the front porch and dozed in Ellie's lap in the evenings of summer, enjoying the breezes in from the coast.

3

Mina spent a lot of time on her porch that first year. She had a little table and chair to do her homework, color, or play with her toy animals. She missed riding George as Olive led him around the yard.

"Leave her be," Kevin told his worried mate, "She'll come around."

One wintery day after Mina had turned seven, a huge gust of wind whirled into her porch and blew everything astray. Papers, paint, and wet brushes all over the place. She was a mad little mess as she salvaged what she could and dragged the table and chair into her room. She resumed painting, angrily, the subject now quite abstract. Kevin, who worked from home as a book-illustrator, his easel facing the room to take advantage of natural light, gave a start when she stalked into the living room with disheveled hair and paint-smudged face and blouse.

"I had an accident, okay?!" she said, disgustedly.

"You sure did!"

Kevin put his brush down and wet a towel in the sink. He squatted before her and washed her face. Then he helped her off with her sticky blouse and washed it in the sink.

"You go change, baby," he said, over his shoulder, hands full of colorful suds and fabric.

"Yes, Poppa."

In the evening, as they ate dinner, Michael, still in uniform but with his blue tunic slung over the fourth chair at table, noted the residue of paint on Kevin's hands.

"I'll tell you later," Kevin said, smirking.

Later that night, after love, he told Michael what had happened.

"She had to come in sometime," Michael chuckled. He began to roll off but Kevin held him down.

"Stay. You make a warm blanket."

"Babe," Michael answered, "I gotta pee."

Kevin snickered and released the man, watching him nimbly trot into their bathroom. He joined him shortly, draping a robe over Michael's broad shoulders.

"Thanks. It's freezing outside. Did you put an extra blanket on Mina's bed?"

"Yes, Daddy."

They washed each other off at the sink then went back to bed, sleeping deeply in spoons.

On her tenth birthday, Michael took Mina on a tour of the Guard's office, where he worked as a data analyst. He was thirty-five now and showed her the photos of the Liberty 15 crew and Abel Garcia's personal effects.

"Who is the lady with the lamp?" Mina asked.

"She wasn't a real person, but a concept. Their ship also bore her name, Liberty."

"Were they bad people?"

"Two of them were. One was evil and the other vain and selfish. I'll tell you more when you're older."

As kids the universe over do, Mina sighed and muttered, "When I'm *older*, gee whiz!"

"The lady was very kind and decent, and the Elder very wise. He was the most like our people."

Brother Timothy had died only the past fall, well over 100. He had been Michael's mentor as a CG cadet. Mina looked at the photo of the two of them together.

"He loved you very much," she said knowingly.

"Yes, and I him," he admitted after a moment. One of the gifts that bright, artistic children of their Earth possessed was second sight, which diminished as they got older. Kevin occasionally 'knew' things, like the severity of a coming storm or a song about to be played on their eclectic radio station. Kevin dismissed it now as heightened awareness.

As twelve began to wane and her teens approached, Michael began to dread losing her to prep school as much as Eleanor had before Mina moved in with him and Kevin, but Mina was raring to go. She had talked with her mothers about their alma mater and read the brochures available at the city public

school she attended. The all-girls school was run by an adjunct of the citadel matriarchies, which had been born centuries before after the final world war. Based on Anglican theories, its mores were strict, with the one obvious difference, beyond an all-female clergy. The all-male schools were less rigid, based on a Montessori-like methodology.

Bess had even led her stepdaughter on a tour of Alder Brook, Ellie and Kevin in tow. The campus was a series of streamlined two-story brick buildings and tree-lined streets. Students wore traditional white blouses and dark-colored slacks, some with scarves in the school colors of orange and dark blue. Mina already had begun to wear hers -- bought by Bess at the student union -- around the house or in the park, as her grade school forbid any type of ornamentation. Although the girls could wear their hair in any conservative fashion, any additions like barrettes or ribbons instead of bobby pins and rubber-bands, landed them in a day's detention. Ironically, by their mid-twenties, most of the world's women wore their hair short.

On her last evening at home, Michael and Kevin gave her a small going-away dinner. Bess had sent flowers and her mother the pail in which she had milked her first goat to set them in. These items served as the centerpiece of the fete, the table illuminated by candlelight. Mina stood up and held out a glass of cider to her fathers and saluted them in a sort of naive way that would make most cynic's eyes roll. Michael and Kevin, however, were touched. Mina was heading towards womanhood with her eyes clear and her head high.

CALVIN WRIGHT

Calvin Wright woke at a quarter past three in the morning to find his pregnant wife Caroline standing at an odd angle in the light from the bathroom. He got up and went to her, and felt the moisture on the bare tile floor.

"My water broke, Cal," she gasped, "Call the midwife. Hurry!"

After assisting Caroline to the bed, Calvin ran outside and summoned a night watcher. A teenage boy, who was assigned to the Wright's case, rushed over.

"My wife is in labor; please get Sister Jean!"

"Yes sir!" and the boy ran off towards the convent.

Calvin noticed that the wind had picked up, whirling loose leaves and twigs around the citadel interior. As he walked back into the apartment, he heard a small cry from his son's bedroom. Tony sat on the edge of his bed, wiping sleep-sand out of his eyes.

"Daddy, I heard something."

"Your mama's in labor, honey. You're gonna be a big brother in a couple of hours."

Calvin picked the four year-old up and held him briefly, kissing his neck, then lay him back down.

"You go to sleep now, 'kay?"

"Yes, Daddy."

As the boy shut his eyes and rolled over to face the wall, Calvin looked down at him with overwhelming love. He left the room, carefully shutting the door.

In the other bedroom, Caroline lay doing her breathing exercises.

"Con-tract-shuns five minutes a-part," she panted.

"Okay, my love, Sister Jean is on her way."

He pulled up a chair and held her left hand. The strength in it always amazed him. He often felt she should be working in the fields beside him, gathering corn into bushels, instead of sitting on the citadel council where she---

"Ohhhhhhhhhh! Dear God, the pressure!" she cried out suddenly.

Outside, a mile out to sea, thunder could be heard booming. Sister Jean swept in, her green midwifery habit rustling. She nodded at Calvin and turned on a brighter light overhead. Caroline shielded her eyes, squinting. Calvin rose and returned with a kerchief to place over her head.

Sister Jean repositioned Caroline on the bed, working a heavy, fluid-collecting towel under her body with Calvin's help. It took just over an hour for his daughter to be born. By then, the storm had come ashore and it was pouring outside. Sister Jean stayed until Caroline stabilized, then left them alone by way of the roofed open hallway that ran the length of the living quarters, her waterproof cloak deflecting most of the rain.

By daybreak, the rain still fell, and the dim light filled the now-darkened room by way of a small window over the back of the bed. All of the housing-quarter bedrooms faced the fields beyond the citadel walls, the front rooms given over to living and kitchen. Calvin sat with his swaddled daughter in an easy chair, his feet up on the bed. Both dozed softly. Tony wandered in, hungry and curious.

"Good morning, Daddy and Mama and Baby!" he piped up.

Calvin stirred as his wife slept on. He held a shush finger to his lips and carefully got up, placing the baby in a waiting cradle near Caroline. He led the boy into the dining area and sat him in his usual high chair, a stool with a low back. Bleary-eyed, he pulled a bottle of goat's milk from the refrigerator and poured his son a half-cup. The boy sipped it gratefully as Calvin heated water for cornmeal porridge and pot of tea for himself and Caroline. As the boy dug into his breakfast, Calvin brought a tray into their bedroom and set it on the edge of the bed. Caroline was awake and already feeding their daughter. Calvin held the cup to his wife's lips, the tea bolstered with honey and milk, which she drank with pleasure.

"Oh, that's good," she sighed.

He fed her half the porridge in the bowl, then ate the cooler portion.

"I know we needed the rain," she said, "but this is ridiculous."

Outside, the rain pounded the roofs and fields. The citadel fishing fleet remained at harbor, the men waiting it out below decks or at home with their families. The town came to a standstill, except for the convent school, where classes went on as usual. Gradually, the waters rose, lapping the raised edges of the open corridor, then breaching them. The citadel was essentially a horseshoe with only one exit to the fields, through the mother-house. Citizens instinctively began to roll up soft furnishings and load them into their four-foot high attic spaces, along with clothing, non-perishables, and personal mementoes. The apartments were soon populated by the wooden frames of sofas, chairs, and beds, the shelves bare of books and other items. Soon the water began to creep beneath door-sills, as the people headed up to the mother-house's upper floor to wait out the flooding. Cots had been set up by the sisters and students in the school's cafeteria, in groups of four or six, depending on how many households also housed widowed elders. The room was built to hold 350 people, more than enough for the citizenry; the sisters and novitiates would have to eat in their rooms for the time being.

The water was six inches deep in the Wright apartment. He had lifted their belongings into the attic with the help of neighbors, and had sent his son and daughter ahead to the mother-house with his parents and a nurse. Caroline was still too exhausted to move, but with the bed only a foot above the floor, she would have to be carried carefully out as soon as possible. A rowboat was waiting outside the door. Calvin carefully wrapped her in a poncho and carried her to the craft, which he then pulled along the corridor to the mother-house. Neighbors then rolled up their bedding and hid it in the bedroom attic-space. The waters rose higher, clearing the tops of the bed frames and pouring into lower drawers of now-empty chests. Although all electrical outlets were located six feet above the floor, and appliances unplugged, refrigerator motors were compromised. Toilets and other plumbing were adversely affected and soon the water was filled with human waste and other debris. Ultimately, the flooding reached three feet within the compound.

Green Cove citizens awoke the next morning to find a dry sky and sodden landscape. Cleanup began immediately after breakfast as the adults began to mop out and sterilize their apartments and small businesses. The fishermen headed back out to sea and the field-workers salvaged what they could from the crops. Women in plumbing and mechanics uniforms set to work repairing flood damage, some assisted by their husbands and older children. Calvin stayed with his family in the mother-house, assisting downstairs the cleansing of the convent's lower floor. He was a model husband and father.

SEAN WILLIAMS

Sean Williams bit into the bittersweet-sour tang of the green citrus fruit in his hand, sucking out the juice and feeling the astringent bite back from the cut-open rind. His lips continued to tingle for several minutes after. He layed in a rope hammock beneath a palm-thatched gazebo on the beach of an EC Southern Island, inhaling the lime scent and fresh sea breeze. His bare bottom felt the breeze as well. Beside him, in another hammock, lay his dozing companion, Lucius, a darker-skinned native to the

islands. His nude body was beautifully-muscled, though Sean had thoughtfully covered his loins with a small towel as a barrier to sand-flies.

Sean was on his summer vacation and Lucius was his paid companion, a gift from the government, for whom he worked. Lucius cooked for him, kept their hotel room clean, and slept with Sean, who limited their relations to little more than cuddling. He had been widowed less than a year and was still incapable of intense lovemaking.

Sean was 43 and had lost his husband, Tom, to a bus-train collision, a terrible loss after nearly thirty years together. A normally good worker, his job had suffered from emotional stress the last several months as the anniversary of the accident neared. This vacation couldn't have come at a better time for him. He and Lucius had hit it off immediately, going fishing and swimming in the shallow water off the island, and exploring the jungled hills above the shoreline, clad only in shorts and hiking sandals. But just as he was dozing off, he heard a tremendous roar above the roof of the gazebo, as if a freight train were somehow flying overhead. As he turned his head to the left, and leapt out of the hammock, the source revealed itself to be indeed man-made. It was metallic-white and shaped like an arrowhead, trailing an orange and black plume of fire.

Sean ran up to the small hotel to find other men standing in various states of undress staring aghast at the sky and talking excitedly. No one knew what it was, though one man openly speculated, "not of this earth." Sean entered the hotel lobby, where the manager sat behind the counter jabbering on the radio headset to a government official on the mainland. He was an older gentleman with prints of ancient craft on his office walls, including one that resembled the machine that had just flown over the island and heading towards the desert mainland. After the manager hung up his headset, Sean pointed the craft out.

"It looked like that."

"I know," said the manager.

"But how could that be?" asked Sean.

"I do not know. To speculate might be... illegal."

As Sean worked for the government, he nodded knowingly. There had been talk about reviving aviation in recent years, the few surviving craft warehoused on the desert's arid plain a few miles inland. As the suggestion came from the female division of the government transportation department where Sean worked, it was ignored as usual. EC men of the ruling caste were famous for their chauvinism and had fewer women working amongst them in higher-level positions than their WC sisters. The men viewed the women as war-mongerers, little better than the females who ran the citadels.

Sean went to his room and pulled on his clothes. He took a hip-pack with his essentials inside and caught the first ferry over to the continent. Showing his credentials to the policing official at the harbor, he then got a ride with them to the western coast where the vessel had crashed just offshore. He was there when they brought the survivors in, three men and a woman. They all wore white uniforms of a synthetic material, and they all spoke English. The captain was aggressive and soon determined to be of the inferior male caste. He and his wife were placed in medical quarantine together before interrogation and deportation to the nearest citadel. The two normal men were interviewed, the older

one wiser and most interesting of the pair. As they were observed during medical quarantine, it was determined that they, too, were a married couple by the younger man's comforting of his older mate.

Although he was not privy to further direct contact with the aliens, Sean kept tabs on their subsequent existence on the planet. The hostile male was soon exterminated, the female absorbed into the mother-house. The wiseman was welcomed into one of the university enclaves, while his lover gradually went quite mad and had to be institutionalized.

2

"It's as if," Mina postulated, "God, in her infinite wisdom--"

"But enough about Mother Madeleine," Louise interjected drily.

-- created dozens of little Earths around the universe, just to see how each culture would develop."

They were sitting outside on the rear terrace of a restaurant in the theater district. Mina and her wife, Louise, and Louise's grandfather Sean had just seen a science fiction play based on part of Abel Garcia's autobiography, about a team of their people traveling to Garcia's planet in a resurrected Liberty 15.

"Just to see what they could see," Sean laughed, though the concept did make him uneasy. Produced forty years after the alien arrival, some felt the play a mockery of the Continental Guard and though satire was legal in their world, it was a questionable entertainment.

"I thought it was an impressive production myself," said Mina, "And don't knock Madeleine, my love. After all, she's made me a popular writer."

Mina Wilson-Williams' biography of Madeleine Howe had become an international bestseller, although the government quietly disapproved. Its publication was allowed, however, as a work of world history.

"Why anyone would want to see Garcia's Earth in the first place..." Louise said, picking a grain of rice off her tunic and flicking it off into the bushes. "Imagine a world ruled by the vermin of the citadels! Revolting."

"Your mother, for one, my dear," Sean said of his daughter. "Olivia, like other members of the medical profession, was fascinated by Garcia. I wish you had followed her into the sciences – perhaps you'd have more respect for them, as well as for faith."

Mina laid her hand over her elder's aged fingers, squeezing gently. A quarter-century after witnessing the crash of Liberty 15, he had joined the monastic life. His daughter, Olivia, made a name for herself in gerontology, but had died of cancer before turning forty. Her daughter, Louise, was an accountant. She had, blessedly, chosen not to procreate.



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